

Letter from Scotland

It's been a strange revolt but one with widespread effects. For three days this week, schools in 24 of Scotland's 32 districts were closed, or half-closed, because of a strike by janitors and other support staff. Families have had their carefully worked-out routines disrupted and in some cases they have lost earnings.

There are several surprising things about these closures. Most parents seem to have just accepted them, acknowledging that the strikers have a case. All the closures have been caused by just one trade union, Unison, the other two having called off their action while they ballot their members. And it has reminded us of a fact we appear to have forgotten, that auxiliary staff are just as important as the leading professionals.



An autumn of discontent in Scotland's schools

The dispute is over pay, of course. The local councils have offered a rise of between 6 and 10 per cent, the lowest paid getting the highest figure. The unions say that doesn't make up for the rise in the cost of living. The Scottish Government has been hiding behind the blackboard, hoping the local councils will solve the problem. Eventually, last week, it was forced to give councils an extra £80 million to settle the dispute but that, clearly, has not worked.

We are waiting to see what it's next offer will be or whether the unions will settle for 6 per cent this year and come back of more next year. The first minister Humza Yousaf never tires of telling us his hands are tied by an austerity budget dictated by the Tories at Westminster. But he could raise taxes, if he had the courage to face outraged voters. He is caught in the classic dilemma of politics, people want the government to do more but are unwilling to pay for it.

Another alarming example is climate change. We are all in favour of targets but less enthusiastic about achieving them. So, by some convoluted argument, Rishi Sunak has been persuaded to allow a Norwegian company to start producing oil and gas from the Rosebank field north west of Shetland. Apparently this will help us cut our carbon emissions and aid the transition to renewable energy. Mr Yousaf says this is simply "climate denial".

His own SNP, though, is not completely united on the issue of climate change. One of the party's old warhorses, Fergus Ewing, has been rebelling over issues such as the transition out of oil and gas, the bottle re-cycling scheme, marine conservation areas, the duelling of the A9 road. It all came to a head when he voted against the government and in favour of sacking of the Green Party minister Lorna Slater. This week he was suspended from the party, but only for a week and 9 MSPs stood grimly behind him, including Mr Yousaf's leadership rival Kate Forbes.

Meanwhile, the climate has continued to change. We may have escaped the first storm of the autumn, Storm Agnes, but the long-term trend is causing a drastic decline in our natural species. The latest State of Nature Report from conservation organisations, tells us that one-in-nine of all Scottish species are in decline. Eleven of our most common seabirds have almost halved in number over the last 35 years. Swifts, curlews, and lapwings are down by over 60 per cent. Some species of moths have almost disappeared over the last 50 years. Lichens and mosses are down by 60 per cent.

Even the human species is not living as long. Life expectancy in Scotland has fallen for the third year running. The average woman now lives for 80.7 years, the average man for 76.5. No one is blaming climate change, and it's pretty clear that the cause is "austerity," cuts to welfare benefits and to health and care services. It's found in its most extreme form in the number of drug deaths where Scotland leads Europe in this

dreadful league. This week, Glasgow City Council announced it will be testing the UK's first drug consumption room where addicts can inject themselves under expert care but using their own drugs. [One of the Edinburgh councillors who backed a similar move here has written about it here.](#)

Scotland also has a well-known problem with alcohol, though most of us regard ourselves as "responsible drinkers". This dates back to Queen Victoria who pioneered the practice during a visit to Blair Atholl Castle in 1844. She is said to have particularly enjoyed the "Atholl Brose", a whisky distilled on the estate, but of course she did not drink too much of it. Rich connoisseurs will be able to bid for that very whisky, because 40 bottles of it have been found in a forgotten corner of the cellars, dated 1841, making it the oldest whisky in the world.

I wonder what it will taste like, and whether it will improve the drinker's view of Scotland or ruin it.